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DEPT FOR NEA/ELA, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/14/2017

TAGS: PHUM PGOV KIRF EG

SUBJECT: MUSLIM-BORN CONVERT TO CHRISTIANITY DESCRIBES  
RECENT DETENTION

REF: CAIRO 2292 AND PREVIOUS

Classified by DCM Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Marian Elly Salib Abdel Masih, a Muslim-born convert to Christianity formerly known as Shaymaa Mohamed El-Sayed, met with poloff on August 12 to discuss her July detention by the police in Alexandria (reftel). Marian provided details about her conversion to Christianity, her resultant alienation from her family, her July 2007 arrest and detention, and her current circumstances. Marian told us she did not suffer any physical or sexual abuse at the hands of the Egyptian police and that she does not feel that she is in any immediate danger. She appeared to be in good health and spirits. We find her account credible, but we also believe that Marian, and others in her situation, such as Mohamed El-Hegazy whose case is garnering considerable media attention, as Muslim-born converts to Christianity in Egypt, will continue to face serious and urgent security concerns.  
End summary.

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Background  
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¶2. (C) We raised our concerns over the Marian case with MFA and Ministry of Interior officials on several occasions in the second half of July. As noted reftel, a senior State Security Investigations Service (SSIS) officer on July 25 confirmed Marian's July 16-23 detention in connection with an ongoing investigation into a missing persons and document fraud case, but denied that she had suffered any mistreatment and asserted that she had been willingly released to her family. See reftel for further background.

¶3. (C) We also made contact with Marian's Cairo attorney Ramses Al-Naggar (protect) who eventually agreed on August 9, after several discussions, to facilitate a face-to face meeting with Marian. Al-Naggar told us that GOE security personnel had not tortured or otherwise harmed Marian. Al-Naggar said that he was aware of many individuals who had been tortured by the Egyptian police while in custody, but that Marian had not been tortured. Poloff and LES political specialist traveled to El-Gouna, Red Sea Governorate, for an August 12 meeting with Marian, who was accompanied by Al-Naggar. Marian's account of her own story follows.

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Marian's Story  
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¶4. (C) Born in 1981, Marian grew up in Ibrahimiyia,

Alexandria in a pious Muslim family. (Her birth name was Shaymaa Mohamed El-Sayed.) She said that she was anti-Christian in her outlook until a colleague at the travel agency where she worked recommended that she read the Bible prior to attacking Christianity. Starting in 2000, she began to read the Bible which in turn led her to attend services with increasingly enthusiasm at a Coptic Orthodox church in Ganakles, Alexandria. The priest at this Church refused to baptize her, apparently because of his reluctance to create controversy.

¶ 15. (C) In late 2001, a certain Father Andrawos (a Coptic Orthodox priest who had worked in Canada) visited Alexandria and encouraged Shaymaa to try to travel to Canada where he would baptize her, but the Canadian Embassy refused to grant her a visa. Shaymaa then went to Anba Bakir Church in Abou-Kir, and told the priest that she was Protestant and wished to become Orthodox. He agreed to help, but only if she could obtain a statement from the Protestant authorities confirming her Protestantism. After she was unsuccessful in her effort to secure a letter from the Protestant authorities, the Anba Bakir priest eventually relented and baptized her as Marian Elly Salib.

¶ 16. (C) Marian kept her new identity hidden from her family and continued to live with her parents until they challenged her during Ramadan (likely in November 2002) about her failure to pray. Marian said that her father beat her over her lapsed Muslim faith. Marian said she then fled to the protection of a Father Mikhail in Manshiya, Alexandria. She also contacted a former colleague from the travel agency, Mina (a Coptic Orthodox man), to learn if he could provide any information about her parents' search for her. Marian's renewed contact with Mina led to him proposing marriage, which she accepted. Father Samuel Azmi (a priest based in

Shubra Al-Khaima near Cairo, who is widely known for his work with Muslim-born converts to Christianity) officiated at the wedding. The couple moved to Fayed, near Ismailiya, at the end of 2002.

¶ 17. (C) In April 2003, SSIS investigators appeared in Fayed, apparently looking for Marian. Marian's father had filed a kidnapping complaint against Mina with SSIS. Marian and Mina fled back to Alexandria where Father Agostinos of the Moharram Bek Church provided them with a place to stay. Marian said that two other Muslim-born converts, Yusuf and Mariam, helped her to obtain a false national ID card from Mr. Aziz in the civil registry office for LE 3000 (approximately \$550). She received the fake ID and birth certificate (both issued in her new name and indicating that she was Christian) in September 2003.

¶ 18. (C) Marian said that several Christian activists, including individuals named Raif and Magdy Guirguis Faam, were working in 2003 to collect testimony of Muslim-born converts to Christianity, apparently to publicize their plight in the United States. Marian said she declined to be interviewed because of her doubts about the activists' integrity. She heard later that some of the converts who they interviewed had stolen Raif and Magdy's recording equipment, apparently out of fear that the converts' security might be compromised by Raif and Magdy's publicity.

¶ 19. (C) In January 2004, Marian and Mina, afraid that they would be discovered in Alexandria, moved to the resort town of Al-Gouna where Mina secured a job with Orascom, the construction and telecom conglomerate owned by the Sawiris family. Marian said she and her husband experienced no problems in Al-Gouna and she soon found work in a health spa as a massage therapist. They lived in Al-Gouna until marital problems in 2007 led to their separation in July 2007. Contrary to some accounts, Marian said she had no children with Mina.

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Marian's Detention  
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¶10. (C) Marian left Al-Gouna to visit friends in Alexandria after she separated from Mina. On July 15, 2007, a former neighbor recognized her at the Silsila Cafe, in Alexandria's Shatbey district, and summoned her parents. Her parents tried to separate her from her friends and in the ensuing altercation, police arrived after bystanders reported sectarian strife. The police detained Marian, along with her parents and friends, at the Bab Sharq police station. Marian reported that a low ranking officer roughly grabbed her arm, but that she was not otherwise mistreated. Marian initially insisted that she was Christian by birth and didn't know the family who was asserting that she was their daughter. Her father and mother told the police that Mina (Marian's now estranged husband) had kidnapped their daughter.

¶11. (C) Marian said that a police detective, Walid Yassin, conducted the initial investigation in her case, but soon turned the matter over to an SSIS officer known only as Mohsen, who told Marian that SSIS knew her original Muslim identity. Marian continued to assert to investigators that she had been born Christian, and she displayed for Mohsen the cross tattooed on her wrist (a common practice among Egyptian Copts), but she eventually admitted that she had been born Muslim. A more senior SSIS officer, Col. Adel Nafa', tried to convince her to reconvert to Islam, and using verbal threats and crude language, tried to obtain information about what he asserted was a network of Muslim-born converts to Christianity. Marian told Col. Nafa' that a certain Father Yousef Asaad, who had died several years earlier, was the only source she could provide.

¶12. (C) Col. Nafa' also arranged for a Muslim cleric to visit Marian in detention. The cleric intimated that she had converted because of a romance or sexual relationship but Marian told him she had converted "as a Christian, not as a prostitute." She said she told Nafa' that she was not afraid of death either at hands of police or by her family. She noted that Nafa' and his colleagues did not threaten her with any bodily harm, but they did eventually move her to a general holding cell where other inmates came to be aware of her Muslim background, which she felt put her at risk.

¶13. (C) Shortly after Marian's move to the general holding cell, SSIS moved her to Cairo on July 21, apparently in connection with investigations into her fraudulent ID card. On July 22, a deputy public prosecutor ordered her release and signed a release order that identified her by her Christian name. SSIS returned her to Alexandria. On July 23

her parents collected Marian from Bab Sharq police station, Alexandria. Marian said her father beat her in front of the police station. Back at home, Marian said her parents did not threaten her or give her other cause for fear during her the five-day period she spent with them after her release. She said her parents did arrange to have "nine sheikhs" counsel her, one of whom frightened her by his aggressive demeanor. After five days with her parents in Alexandria, Marian returned to Al-Gouna. She said her parents did not try to prevent her departure and they know that she is now in Al-Gouna.

¶14. (C) Marian said she does not know what the future holds for her. She asserted she did not feel that she is in any immediate danger, but worried that publicity about her case might cause her additional problems. She said that the vexed issue of conversion away from Islam remains so problematic in Egypt that emigration to the United States may be the best solution for her long term security.

¶15. (C) Marian had not seen the Compass Direct accounts of her alleged torture (reftel) and expressed surprise over the apparent misrepresentation of her situation. She noted that in addition to the fact that she did not suffer any torture at the hands of the Egyptian police, she does not have a young son, as several activists have claimed. We asked Marian about her contacts with Father Athanasios Khalil (of Baramos Monastery) and Magdy Guirguis Faam, two activists who

had asserted their close familiarity with her case. Marian said she had once spoken on the phone with Father Athanassios and once met Magdy Guirgis Faam (in connection with his 2003 effort to document the plight of Muslim-born converts to Christianity).

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